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Book Review: (Re)Thinking Orientalism: Using Graphic Narratives to Teach Critical Visual Literacy

Antonio López

John Cabot University, Rome, Italy

(Re)Thinking Orientalism: Using Graphic Narratives to Teach Critical Visual Literacy. Minding the Media: Critical Issues for Learning and Teaching by Rachel Bailey Jones. 2014. New York: Peter Lang.

The terrorist attack in Paris against the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, on January 15, 2015, led to a global debate about the tension between freedom of press and communication ethics. In mainstream media, advocates for the right to offend were pitted against those who cautioned against offensive stereotyping and the harm it does to communities. Unfortunately, there was very little middle ground, due largely to a lack of discussion about two crucial points. First, there was an absence of a historical context that explained the image ecology *Charlie Hebdo* was operating in, one in which there are disproportionate power relations in how cultural identity is mediated. Secondly, very little was said about the potential role of media literacy to act as an intervening tool to explore differing cultural perspectives of speech and representation. Though Rachel Bailey Jones' book, *(Re)Thinking Orientalism* was completed before the attack, its timely release right after offers media literacy educators a handy guidebook for how to navigate many of the issues raised by the Charlie Hebdo massacre.

(Re)Thinking Orientalism's primary aim is to offer a pedagogical model for using graphic narratives in the classroom to explore and contest what Jones calls a dominant "visual Orientalist" discourse in Western media. Graphic narratives are fiction and nonfiction stories told in comic form, and can range from graphic novels to comic journalism. The book also examines news media, photography, comic books and television in post-9/11 USA. In particular, Jones focuses on several works that deal with the representation of the Islamic Other, especially Muslim women and their primary sign of difference in Western culture, the veil. As the title suggests, Palestinian scholar Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is a key framework used for analysis; however, the book is also a primer for using graphic narratives to explore visual literacy, visual language of comics, the representation of self/other, feminist theory, intersectionality, postcolonial theory, border theory, globalization, imagined communities, multicultural pedagogy, and critical media literacy. As Jones asserts, "The work of critical visual literacy is to teach the visual codes of identity, of difference, and of the other. If we can understand how these codes were constructed historically and in contemporary media outlets, we can educate to think beyond codes and the assumptions they can carry" (p. 38). For background purposes, Jones spends ample time defining and putting these coding systems into a historical context, but her proposed method for teaching these systems allows for discovery through critical inquiry.

Jones argues that historically Muslim women's bodies have been used as a marker of difference between the West and Arab/Muslim world, the veil being a signifier of oppression and otherness. This draws upon theories developed in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which explains how the West has projected its own prejudices

of the non-European Other into visual regimes. Subsequently, stereotypes of the so-called Orient that were initially disseminated in the art of French painters in the 19th century still persist in today's popular media, whether in films like *American Sniper* or television shows like *Homeland*, or in the evening news and comics. Indeed, while gains have been made in contesting the stereotyping of gays, women, African American, Latinos and other under-represented groups, Arabs and Muslims often remain fair game for prejudiced representations, with Muslim women being the least understood and most contested point of reference in Western media. From British and French colonizers in North Africa, to post-9/11 representations of the Muslim world and the War on Terror, the signifying practice of portraying female Muslims as an oppressed class is remarkably consistent and often used to justify military intervention. The abundance of Muslim and Arab stereotypes has led to a kind of Islamophobia Jones calls "toxic xenophobia."

To problematize these representations, Jones offers a novel approach. There are a variety of contemporary graphic narratives that explore these issues from diverse perspectives, ranging from "insider" to "outsider" experiences of Islam and the Arab world. Using a model Jones developed, she suggests that visual representation of Muslim Middle Eastern identity can be explored from three different perspectives: representation of self, representation of imagined self, and representation of self-and-other. The first category is comprised of works that are self-mediated, such as the autobiographical graphic narrative, *Persepolis* (2000), by Iranian-born comic artist, Marjane Satrapi. The second category, representation of imagined self, relates to stories by authors that see themselves as part of larger, imagined communities. For this discussion Jones investigates graphic narratives that came out of Iran, Tunisia and Egypt that explore an insider experience of social protest movements. The third category, representation of self-and-other, is divided into two sub-groups. First is represented by authors that offer outsider, but self-reflective, representations, such as Joe Sacco's comic journalism masterpiece, *Palestine* (1996). The second discussion is of an outsider graphic narrative that falls into the Orientalist tradition, such as Craig Thompson's *Habibi* (2011).

A comparative analysis of these works allows students to explore a variety of representations and the cultural/historical contexts that situate them. The result is a nuanced investigation of our own understanding of the Other that enables students to explore the difference between authentic, subjective constructions of lived experience in graphic narratives versus stereotypical images in mass media and the news. "It is this purposeful subjectivity that makes these texts powerful antidotes to the way that difference is often represented in mass-market journalism that pretends to be objective and removed from its subject. The obfuscation of the producer's voice, creating an omniscient unbiased facade, can make the perspective of the producer appear natural and correct instead of partial and constructed. The focus and value placed on constructed objectivity are remnants of Western intellectual and colonial traditions that naturalized the Western position at the top of an imagined hierarchy of humanity" (150).

Some *JMLE* readers might object to the overt critical perspective of the author, which diverts from NAMLE's principle concerning mixing advocacy with media literacy. For example, many media literacy educators believe that media literacy should not simply be a form of activism in disguise, nor should it be didactic. Jones clearly situates her approach as a critical intervention that is not devoid of a political stance, in particular she advocates for a particular approach to social justice. As she states in the conclusion, "There is an important distinction to be made between accepting students who are different from each other and from the norm and creating curriculum that honors the experience of these students and challenges injustice and oppression. I argue that we do not have a true critical multicultural curriculum with overt instruction in how to identify and fight against racism, sexism, heterosexism, able-ism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and so forth. Tools for critical literacy in text, image, and the media need to be created and used in classrooms to allow for long-term systemic changes to the system" (p. 202).

However, these concerns are alleviated by Jones' inquiry-based approach. The comparative method allows for students to discover the different coding strategies of graphic narrative authors. These books can also be weighed against historical documents (images and written texts) and works of art. For example, if one puts

side-by-side Thompson's *Habibi* with paintings by 19th Century French painters like Eugène Delacroix, one can see an obvious similarity between the settings (baths and harems) and Arab women portrayed as sexualized objects for visual conquest. Moreover, the analytical tools Jones offers, in particular those that focus on the medium of comics, help us understand why graphic narratives are suitable for exploring critical visual literacy. This is especially significant at a time when education policy is defunding visual arts in favor of math and science (STEM). In a globalized visual culture, the ability to decode visual representations will become increasingly vital for developing global citizenship. In an era that has been defined—for better or for worse—by the so-called “clash of civilizations,” we simply need to create more opportunities to defuse a tense environment in which wars are perpetually fought and justified through our image culture. Subsequently, Jones asserts, “My hope, in using contemporary art as pedagogy, is to provide the seeds of doubt and uncertainty about assumptions that lead students to a curiosity about the representation of difference and the formation of identity” (p. 211).

Though primarily written for college faculty teaching undergraduate students, *(Re)Thinking Orientalism* has plenty to offer high school teachers as well. The concluding chapter reviews a variety of books that promote the use of comics in the classroom, offering a robust rationale for their academic relevance. If you are one of the many who feel inadequately equipped to teach about comics, let alone discuss them in a classroom, this book is a very clearheaded, easy to follow guide that will help any novice understand how to introduce comics within a sophisticated and academically rigorous framework. In terms of cultivating media literacy skills, what is great about the comic medium is the way it combines traditional text, images, and the relationship between them. This affords many different levels of intervention into the media text and draws upon a variety of skillsets. For this reason, Jones' pedagogical project hits all the right notes: it confronts representational practices, cultural signification, narrative structures, discourses, and cross-cultural communication. It's hard for me to imagine a better-timed resource than this book.

References

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